

KeepSpace: an integrated approach to building better communities Special Achievement

The Vision...

You live in a nice house with a nice yard. The kids play with the neighbors' kids. You can walk to the grocery store and church. Daycare and school are within five minutes. There are fewer cars on the road because everything is nearby, in town. And the air is cleaner because of it. People walk, take the bus, or ride bikes on the bike path, through the wooded open space that surrounds the neighborhood. You can afford to keep your home and everyone - including the young man working at the local market - can afford to live close by. His is a nice apartment right above the store, on Main Street. This is a real community, where neighbors meet, people work, children play. This is KeepSpace.

This is the vision Rhode Island Housing has for Rhode Island and its residents: communities throughout the state with safe homes, good jobs, nearby schools and services, a healthy environment, wonderfully preserved open spaces... communities where people enjoy living and become actively involved.

The Challenge

Rhode Island, like many states, is struggling to provide quality affordable homes for residents who have been hit hard by the weak economy and high unemployment, but state and federal resources are scarce. As the smallest state in the nation, and with the Atlantic Ocean as our eastern border, we also have little room for growth or expansion, and the open and natural space we have is under ever-increasing pressure for development. Regulatory barriers like zoning requirements that require large lots or prohibit a mix of residential and commercial uses, and often long and sometimes contradictory permitting and approval processes at the state and local level can make “smart growth” almost impossible. To make matters worse, the development process itself is almost designed to be confrontational with developers trying to maximize the use of the land, residents opposing the loss of open space to development, and state agencies, focusing on their specific issues of concern like environmental protection or the creation of affordable homes, often at odds with one another. The challenge becomes how to develop sustainable and thriving communities, with mixed-income development, that retains our communities’ unique sense of place while providing a variety of housing options.

The Solution

In response to the many challenges facing the responsible and sustainable development of affordable homes in our state and a lack of effective coordination and collaboration among various state agencies, Rhode Island Housing founded the KeepSpace Communities initiative. The goal of KeepSpace is to create living, breathing, growing places where neighbors meet, people work, and children play. The type of development that KeepSpace promotes used to happen naturally, but now, communities and developers need help to overcome the hurdles that make this sort of development pattern difficult to achieve today. For our state’s economy to be strong and healthy, we must develop innovative solutions to meet our housing, environmental and workforce needs. KeepSpace offers an integrated long-term solution to these problems.

As the founding partner in this exciting new initiative, Rhode Island Housing has brought together advocates for jobs, the environment, safe homes and the many components that are essential to a good, safe, healthy community to create KeepSpace Communities. Instead of working independently of each other to create small pockets of success in each area, the partners will work *together* to create neighborhoods where a healthy environment is as valued as safe homes and good jobs. Creative partnerships will result in thriving neighborhoods with good-paying jobs, and homes that are beautiful, convenient and affordable. Schools, services, church and cultural centers would all be close-by. Close proximity, coupled with conveniences like bike paths and public transit will help minimize traffic and air pollution. And green building practices will protect and reuse natural resources. KeepSpace is a revolutionary approach to building neighborhoods that include safe, affordable homes; match the local character of each community; and incorporate jobs, culture and a cleaner environment. And, by reusing existing land that has been underutilized or abandoned, KeepSpace Communities will help preserve a precious Rhode Island commodity: open space.

There are 6 key elements to a KeepSpace Community: **A Good Home, A Healthy Environment, Strong Commerce, Sensible Infrastructure, Positive Community Impact, and Integrated Arts, Recreation, Culture and Religion.**

Collaboration is Key

The underlying goal and philosophy of KeepSpace is to create viable and sustainable communities by bringing together all concerned – the community, developers, and state and local regulatory agencies – in a collaborative process to develop a shared vision for the community that embraces the six KeepSpace elements, and work together to implement it. Through these unique partnerships, KeepSpace *combines* expertise and compliments existing resources and initiatives, rather than working separately on isolated parts of land and community development and preservation. The result: strong, healthy, prosperous communities that use integrated solutions to many of the development and environmental challenges facing Rhode Islanders and the state.

Following several years of internal strategic planning sessions, Rhode Island Housing, along with its partners, launched its KeepSpace Communities initiative in August 2007. At the center of the initiative is the KeepSpace Advisory Committee, a diverse group of non-profit housing, smart growth and environmental protection organizations, and state officials responsible for housing, economic development, environmental protection, planning, transportation and health issues that brings together the expertise, experience and program/ funding resources needed to make KeepSpace Communities possible. The collaborative nature of the program allows participants to apply their collective experience and expertise to a specific initiative. This kind of collaboration, streamlining of processes and exchange of ideas is what makes KeepSpace unique.

Through these broad-based partnerships with non-profit organizations, state agencies, local government officials, business leaders and residents, KeepSpace has become Rhode Island's first fully comprehensive and cooperative effort to revitalize our communities and our state. Instead of working independently of each other to create small pockets of success in each issue area, KeepSpace partners work together to create neighborhoods where a healthy environment meets safe homes and good jobs.

The Program

In the summer of 2007, Rhode Island Housing issued a Request for Proposals (RFP) to developers and cities and towns for the first 3-5 communities, with an investment of \$10 million dollars. This investment includes giving priority to proposals in KeepSpace communities through our existing development programs, and new resources to support the planning and plan implementation process. By coordinating this investment with investments by our Advisory Committee members and other KeepSpace partners, we can leverage scarce resources to stimulate unique models of community development, site design and sustainable growth for the future.

As stated in the RFP, this landmark initiative is designed to:

- Enhance relationships between developers and cities and towns throughout Rhode Island
- Ease the regulatory barriers often encountered throughout the permitting process
- Minimize financial risk by providing critical seed funding to support selected projects

In May 2008, the KeepSpace Advisory Committee announced the recipients of the first round of funding, as well as details surrounding these exciting new communities. Selected from 16 responses to the RFP, these four proposals showed the greatest potential to create model KeepSpace Communities in a variety of settings across the state. Two of the selected communities are urban while one is in a suburban and the other a village center setting. Two are transit oriented and all are located along riverways.

Outreach

The selected communities receive initial funding to facilitate the community “visioning” process, a key element to the success of each KeepSpace community, entailing the input and involvement of stakeholders at the local, regional and state level including residents, businesses and community leaders, and key resource and regulatory agencies. Providing funding for this part of the process is vital to creating communities that residents, businesses and stakeholders will embrace. These outreach efforts have resulted in the participation of individuals and organizations who have never been brought to the table before, providing a voice to many who have a vested interest in seeing their communities evolve and thrive. KeepSpace is also about changing the way people think about development in the state. To that end, one of our communities is planning to incorporate a community planning curriculum at its middle school in the Fall that will compliment and inform the design process for that community while engaging children and parents in the planning process.

Each community benefits from the active participation of our KeepSpace Advisory Committee, whose members volunteer their time to regularly attend workshops, meetings, site visits and “visioning” sessions in each of the four communities. Ultimately, these unprecedented partnerships will result in neighborhoods with good-paying jobs, and homes that are beautiful, convenient and affordable. Schools, services, church and cultural centers will all be nearby. Close proximity, coupled with conveniences like bike paths and public transit will help minimize traffic and air pollution. And “green” building practices will protect and reuse natural resources.

In addition to providing the funding to support the development and implementation of the community design process, Rhode Island Housing has created a KeepSpace website, to educate and inform others on the initiative and note progress to date (www.KeepSpace.org). Rhode Island Housing staff have also been active participants in the planning process and participate in volunteer opportunities within the communities, such as a playground build and a festival of sustainable living.

A Vision Realized

Rhode Island Housing has taken “working together to bring you home” to a new level with the KeepSpace effort. We have reached out to new partners with varied interests for a comprehensive and cooperative effort to create thriving communities. The initiative is a major step toward greater synergy between government organizations and private developers in the drive to develop the state while preserving open space. KeepSpace has received widespread support throughout the state and has been widely embraced and noted for its innovative and visionary qualities, as illustrated by extensive statewide media coverage and active participation among community members and stakeholders.

While we are still early in the visioning and community design process, KeepSpace has already resulted in unprecedented collaborations among state agencies, including the institution by the Department of Environmental Management (DEM) of a streamlined review process for projects in KeepSpace communities. All permit or funding applications to DEM from KeepSpace communities will be coordinated through a single point of contact to ensure that these efforts are coordinated and work together to achieve the shared vision for the community. Already their status as KeepSpace Communities has contributed to two of our pilot communities receiving brownfield remediation grants from DEM. KeepSpace also expands upon and complements other state initiatives including Land Use 2025 and the State Strategic Housing Plan, both of which promote concentrating development activity in areas with the infrastructure to support it, preserving open space, and encouraging a mix of uses in relatively dense, previously developed areas whenever possible.

KeepSpace Communities are a bold step to ensure a safe, healthy future for our children and our children’s children. From Warwick to Westerly and Barrington to Burrillville, KeepSpace is working to revitalize neighborhoods in a way that is beneficial to each and every city and town and their residents while helping to ensure a sustainable Rhode Island for years to come.

This is KeepSpace.